

Afterlife

Nazret Berhane (She/her/hers)

Some of the interpretations of the Afterlife during the Second Temple Judaism period comes from Josephus's two compositions that were written towards the end of the first century CE, Jewish War, and Jewish Antiquities.

According to Josephus, the Essenes, who are authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, believed in maintaining their own purity, in isolation from other, unpure Jews if possible. In regards to their view on Afterlife, they believed that immortal souls would enjoy reward or endure punishment according to their deeds in life without any role for the body. After the death of the body, the soul would be released, and those who were virtuous would enjoy a very pleasant happily ever after. This is the idea of resurrection.

The Pharisees believed that after death, good souls pass “into another body.” This relates/is very similar to the myth of Er at the conclusion of the Plato’s *Republic*, which tells the story of the soldier, Er, who is thought to be dead and descends to the underworld. But when he revives he is sent back to tell humanity what awaits them in the afterlife. He describes an afterlife where the just are rewarded and the wicked are punished. But it is usually thought that Josephus meant they held to the doctrine of resurrection, which is that the soul would not remain naked but would be re-embodied. Wicked souls, on the other hand, will “suffer eternal punishment”.

The Sadducces rejected this idea of immortality and reward and punishment. They believe that there is no afterlife and that the Torah does not indicate any form of afterlife. Though we have little context regarding their interpretation of the afterlife from Josephus, we can conclude that from the remarks of others, it appears that they were particularly focused on worship in the Temple of Jerusalem, and the Mosaic Law.

There is a clear distinction between body and soul in Greek and Platonic traditions, but not within the earlier writings of the Tanakh. Words such as *psykhe*, meaning “soul” in Greek, are used by Plato and Josephus but there is no equivalency in the Tanakh. Another word such as *nefesh*, which is a biblical Hebrew word, sometimes refers to the whole dr. person when translated by *psykhe* in the Septuagint. And frequently in the Tanakh, the hebrew

word *neshamah*, which means “breath” and never “soul”, is used when the idea of an immaterial and immortal soul takes hold among Jews.

1. The central element of Plato’s philosophy is the immortality of the soul, including its existence before entering the body as well as its survival after death.
2. The Tanakh doesn’t say anything explicit about reward and punishment after death. But many academic scholars that have scrutinized the earlier books of the Bible hinted at the belief of resurrection. Examples include the book of Job, where it was implied that Job would be compensated not in this world, but another, and II Kings 2:11, where Elijah was taken to heaven in a “fiery chariot”. But the most explicit reference to the belief of resurrection is in the Book of Daniel. According to Daniel 12:2-3, it says “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Therefore indicating that an afterlife designated for those who are righteous is granted. Towards the end of the Biblical period, both the book of Daniel and the book of Malachi, offered a new interpretation that goes beyond the belief of resurrection. They emphasized that the faithful suffered because they were righteous, whereas the wicked were successful as a consequence of their wickedness. This established a detachment between national suffering and Israel sinning, but that an individual’s actions reflect on their own righteousness, not the entire nation. And that the justice will not occur during one’s lifetime, but after.
 - However, according to the *Mekhilta*, which is a midrash halakha to the Book of Exodus, the Torah mentioned the belief of resurrection. They had interpreted Exodus 15:1, which begins with “Then Moses sang...” in the future tense, arguing that the idea of resurrection in the Torah was presented through this interpretation.
3. Differing from the Book of Daniel, *The Book of the Watchers*, which is now preserved as 1 En. 1-36, was the first Jewish text that heavily influenced interpretations during Second Temple Judaism. The Book of the Watchers talks about a patriarch Enoch who goes on tour with the archangels. He first notices a “fiery abyss” where angels

who came down to earth to marry women are imprisoned. Then he approaches a mountain with four chambers that carry souls of the dead. Three out of four of the chambers were very dark and were perceived to hold souls of the wicked, while the last chamber which had a fountain, was very bright and was perceived to hold souls of the righteous until their Day of Judgement had come. Later on in his journey, Enoch comes to the center of the earth, where he sees a holy mountain and a cursed valley. The holy mountain is identified as Mount Zion, where the temple currently stands, while the cursed valley is identified as Hinnom (which in Hebrew it's called Gehinnom, and in Greek it's called Gehenna). The valley had gotten its "cursed" name after the people of Jerusalem used to sacrifice their children for burnt offerings for the god Moloch. At the end of Enoch's journey, an angel had told him that this is where those who have cursed God would be gathered there forever. This is very clear evidence by some Jews, towards the end of the third century BCE, that the survival of the soul after death is an opportunity to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. This was also found to support the belief in the resurrection of the body.

4. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the expectation of post-mortem reward and punishment is the central point of view in Rabbinic Judaism. To be more specific, the Mishnah reports a saying of Rabbi Jacob saying "This world is like an antechamber before the world to come; prepare yourself in the antechamber so that you may enter the banquet hall."
5. One of the earliest Christian interpretations of the Afterlife, which was the Apocalypse of Peter and later on, the Apocalypse of Paul was written, had many parallels to the Jewish theme of what the Afterlife consisted of. All in all, these Christian apocalyptic writings support the presence of post-mortem reward and punishment, by emphasizing how this paradise consisted of different types of rewards which depended on the types of piety performed, and how this wicked place consisted of different types of punishments which depended on the types of sins committed.

Shifting to Matthew's perspective on the Afterlife, he was very direct in describing the existence of there being an afterlife, and that when the time comes, there will be a Judgement day where God will send us to our eternal destiny, Heaven or hell (Matthew 25:

46). To be more specific, for those who repented of their sin and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, according to Matthew, they will be granted an eternity spent with God and His followers in Heaven. However, for those who rejected Jesus Christ as their savior and continue to commit sins, will face an eternity of darkness. Ways for us to receive eternal life with God has been explicitly stated during the Sermon of the Mount. According to Matthew 7: 13-14, Jesus warns us about our journey to the gates of Heaven, He says, “Enter through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

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